

**Reflections on the 2013 CHOGM in Sri Lanka
Speaking Points for Parliamentary Secretary Obhrai
Hosted by the Royal Commonwealth Society and Carleton
University
Senate Boardroom, Norman Patterson School of
International Affairs, 6:30pm
February 6, 2014**

Opening Comments:

Thank you very much for having me here this evening and for taking time out of your busy schedules to be present. I very much want to thank the Royal Commonwealth Society and Carleton University for making this evening possible. I'm very pleased to see that members of the younger generation and My Commonwealth are here with us tonight.

Although the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (or CHOGM) held in Sri Lanka last November has received a significant amount of media attention over the past year, I'd like to open with some brief comments on the current state of the Commonwealth and the reform process launched at the 2009 CHOGM in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Commonwealth Reform

At the 2009 CHOGM, Heads of Government recognized that the Commonwealth urgently required reform and renewal, and that its credibility as a values-based organization was at great risk. They mandated the creation of an Eminent Persons Group – or EPG - in order to ensure that "the Commonwealth will remain relevant to its times and people in future" and to help to build "a stronger, more resilient and progressive family of nations founded on enduring values and principles." Canada's Senator Hugh Segal, who later became Canada's Special Envoy for Commonwealth Renewal, was a member of this group. The Canadian Branch of the Royal Commonwealth Society was

actively engaged in the reform process, including by presenting a study on the creation of a Commonwealth Charter to the Senate of Canada.

Heads also tasked the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which is the custodian of the Commonwealth's shared values and principles, with considering how it could be more effective in responding to violations of – for example - human rights, democracy, and the rule of law by member states. Until then, CMAG would engage only in cases in which a military *coup d'état* had overthrown a democratically elected government. Heads recognized that CMAG's limited mandate was insufficient.

When they met again at the 2011 CHOGM in Perth, Australia, Heads were presented with two reports. The first was the Eminent Person Group report -- entitled "Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform" – which outlined more than 100 recommendations. One of these recommendations was the creation of a Commonwealth Charter, as an aspirational document bringing together key declarations and statements at the core of Commonwealth values and principles. Heads also received a report the "Strengthening the Role of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group." This served to expand the mandate of CMAG and the potential triggers for its engagement.

The Charter is now in place, the CMAG recommendations accepted by leaders and the majority of the EPG recommendations have been approved for implementation.

Canada was a strong supporter of the reform process -- but we have been disappointed in the follow-up. In our view, the Commonwealth is in a state of serious decline, and has reached a low point in its history.

We strongly believe that for the Commonwealth to remain relevant, it must uphold its declared core values and principles – including democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, and

the rule of law – in member states. The organization, its leadership, and member states have collectively failed to do so.

The Commonwealth Secretariat must also become a more effective organization that is able to demonstrate meaningful results.

Sri Lanka and CHOGM

In terms of Sri Lanka, Canada has repeatedly called for the country's government – as a member of the Commonwealth, host of the 2013 CHOGM, and now current Chair-in-Office – to uphold the organization's core values and principles, including the independence of the judiciary. This need was underscored by last year's impeachment and removal from office of Sri Lanka's Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake.

The lack of progress on accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, together with the refusal of Secretary-General Sharma and the broader Commonwealth membership to respond effectively to this situation contributed to Prime Minister Harper's decision not to attend CHOGM. As you may know, I headed Canada's delegation in Colombo.

Canada was not alone in voicing its criticisms of the Government of Sri Lanka. Indian Prime Minister Singh and Mauritian Prime Minister Ramgoolam also did not attend CHOGM, citing concerns relating to the host country. Other credible international voices and NGOs, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a number of Commonwealth organizations have also expressed serious and continuing concerns.

Although not widely publicized, it is noteworthy that only 27 of 53 member states were represented at the Head of Government level in Colombo.

In an unexpected move, Mauritius announced on the eve of CHOGM that, not only would its Head of Government not attend,

citing a deterioration of Commonwealth values and concerns regarding the situation in Sri Lanka, but that it was no longer willing to host the 2015 CHOGM as scheduled.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Her Majesty the Queen, for the first time since the early 1970s, did not attend CHOGM, citing a reduction in long distance travel. She was represented in Colombo by His Royal Highness Prince Charles.

CHOGM Proceedings

Given the theme of this year's CHOGM – "Inclusive Development: Growth with Equity" – development issues featured prominently, in keeping with the priorities of the majority of (developing) member states.

Despite being in a minority position, Canada successfully met its objectives for CHOGM, including: underscoring concerns about Sri Lanka's failure to uphold core Commonwealth values; stressing the need to reorient the Commonwealth towards its value-added as an international organization; promoting fiscal restraint; and avoiding new financial commitments. Also, working closely with Ghana, Canada's delegation succeeded in introducing references to Child, Early and Forced Marriage in the Communiqué.

Canada also worked to preserve meaningful references to human rights and democracy.

There was disagreement about whether to reference irregularities in Zimbabwe's most recent election, with this language ultimately dropped from the Communiqué when consensus was not possible.

In its capacity as the Commonwealth's Chair-in-Office, and given ongoing human rights concerns, Sri Lanka, and by extension the Commonwealth, continues to be under international scrutiny. Over the next two years, the Commonwealth will be observed to see how it reconciles the actions of its Chair with the values and principles enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter, which was

unanimously adopted by Leaders and signed by Her Majesty the Queen less than one year ago.

While in Sri Lanka, I took the opportunity to meet with people on the ground in Colombo and in Jaffna in the Northern Province. I met with journalists, religious leaders and the Chief Minister of the Northern Province. I also participated in a roundtable discussion on human rights, freedom of expression and religious minorities, and the rule of law. These experiences only strengthened my conviction that Canada was right to take the principled stance that it did.

I also took the opportunity to reiterate Canadian support for inclusive post-conflict reconciliation to enable all Sri Lankans to live in freedom and security.

Moving Forward - Seeking opportunities

Prime Minister Harper has requested a full review of Canada's financial contributions to Commonwealth programs and the Commonwealth Secretariat. We are currently reviewing all possible options.

The Commonwealth has survived periods of crisis in the past – for example, during the South African apartheid -- and has demonstrated its resilience each time.

As a voluntary, values-based association, the Commonwealth is an ideal vehicle through which to promote Canada's foreign policy objectives. It can serve as an incubator for innovation in global governance. For small member states, it provides unique access to G20 powers; for developed countries such as Canada, it provides a means of engaging constructively with emerging economies. CMAG's past successes in restoring democracy to Pakistan and Nigeria provide important examples of the Commonwealth at its best, and what we hope it can return to in the future.

In light of current challenges, we are collectively faced with options. The path chosen could lead to the slow death of a once proud association willing to stand for the values to which we all claim to aspire. Alternatively, it could lead to the reinvigoration of a sovereign group of democracies that holds a credible place on the world stage, and no longer shirks the tough choices.

There is a role for civil society organizations to play in shaping the way forward, and refocusing the Commonwealth on its core values and areas of comparative advantage. Initiatives are underway in London, for example, where the Royal Commonwealth Society is promoting dialogue among High Commissions on the prevention of child, early and forced marriage in member states. Here in Ottawa, the RCS has been very active in organizing the National Student Commonwealth Forum, a Humanitarian Gala Dinner, and an inter-faith service in celebration of Commonwealth Day. Such activities breathe invaluable life into the Commonwealth as a whole.

The crisis we face today is unprecedented, and neither path chosen will be painless.

One thing is certain. Canada will continue to hold the Commonwealth to account for the values expressed in its Charter, and as often expressed by Minister Baird, we will not simply go along to get along.

In conclusion, and before I take a few questions, I would like to present, as a token of my appreciation, a copy of the Charter of the Commonwealth, signed by Her majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to the organizers of tonight's event.

Thank you – Merci!